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# The Jazz Century

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## REFERENCES

*Le Siècle du jazz : art, cinéma, musique et photographie de Picasso à Basquiat*, Paris : Skira  
Flammarion : Musée du quai Branly, 2009

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Please note that as we publish this article, the magazine *Terrain* is bringing out an issue on visuals and sound: "Voir la musique/Seeing Music", n°53, September 2009.

- 1 As befits this kind of publication, there has been no skimping on product quality: the publishers, Skira Flammarion, specialists in this sort of exercise, and partners with the Musée du quai Branly for the occasion, have contributed the full range of their know-how in this area. The catalogue, printed in Italy, is at once opulent (446 p.), luxurious (heavy semi-matt paper, high quality reproductions) and stout (careful stitching).
- 2 It is a challenge to reinstate on paper the dynamism of an exhibition in which jazz is the central subject. Even without mentioning the distance separating the objects on view (pictures, drawings, sculptures, knick-knacks, posters, programmes, photographs, scores, and original album covers...) from their printed reproduction. As far as the films, videos and music which stake out the exhibition circuit are concerned, visitors must call on their own memories and imagination. In relation to the labyrinthine show, the catalogue, edited by Daniel Soutif, contributes a line of thinking that is at once thematic and spread along a chronological axis which clarifies and organizes these reflections. On the whole, the authors have managed to sidestep the pitfall of scholarly sophistication—indispensable but inaccessible to most people—without falling into the trap of simplistic simplifications and trivial narratives. So to read and leaf through *Le Siècle du jazz* with

both interest and pleasure, there is no need to be a clued-up expert in the history and sociology of jazz, nor is there any need to be abreast of the most specialized aesthetic issues which inform and have informed thinking about jazz. The catalogue conveniently stops a relative didactic gap<sup>1</sup> that emerged both from visiting the show and from perusing the visitors' book, its pages filled simultaneously with people marvelling at the collections on view, and their lack of references providing a comprehensive grasp of the range of all there was for them to look at.

- 3 The relationship of jazz to the 20<sup>th</sup> century is hallmarked by its complexity, and first and foremost by a twofold movement which is well described by our catalogue. Jazz was actually inspired by the very modernity from which it drew a significant part of its inspiration: cars, trains, cities and their pace, all overlaid on bustling people, and machines. Jazz came into being at the turn of the century, and managed to appropriate the technology of which it was part and parcel—from the reproduction of sound and imagery to their media coverage. But modernity also took a hold of jazz: there was—and is—a “jazz beat” not only in America but throughout the world, expressed as much in art (this is what is illustrated by the works on display) as in the most humdrum objects which have made been capital out of by the collectors whose treasures are here brought together. Jazz also works its way into a way of being which, at times unbeknownst to us, affects our ways of perceiving the world, our ways of addressing others, and our ways of including ourselves in space and moving about therein, and, in a deeper sense, our relation to desire. This is what probably explains why all the new means of expression (photography, radio, film, comic strip) would, in one way or another, appropriate jazz. Jazz, in turn, ushered back in the debate about the relations between art and desire, which Hegelian aesthetics claimed to have wound up.
- 4 We note that it is not necessarily artists who focused on representing jazz—with its anthology of musicians and dancers, and its public with their frenzied and ecstatic postures—whose aesthetics were most deeply marked by jazz expression. So works as different as those of Stuart Davis and his sense of graphic movement “which is the analogue of a progression of harmonies”<sup>2</sup>, Piet Mondrian trying to recreate the spirit of the Boogie Woogie, and the highly gestural painting of Jackson Pollock—whose *watery paths*<sup>3</sup> so forcefully evoked the multi-rhythmic nature of contemporary jazz, that the saxophonist Ornette Coleman wanted no other illustration within his seminal “Free Jazz”—are totally permeated by a creative inspiration which, as readily admitted by those painters—borrowed from the spirit of jazz. Other artists—Winold Reiss, Archibald Motley and Robert Colescott spring to mind—seem to accumulate in their works both the figures of a jazz climate explicitly offered to the eye, and the spirit in which they were steeped.
- 5 But the osmosis of jazz and the 20<sup>th</sup> century does not stop at art in museums, and here again the movement is twofold. First, the “jazz industry” managed to capture painters and graphic artists to produce the posters, programmes and, above all, record albums which it needed for its promotion.<sup>4</sup> We should mention the various accredited artists, the ones who made a name for themselves thanks to jazz: David Stone Martin, Burt Goldblatt, Reid Miles, Pierre Merlin (graphic arts), David Friedlander, Herman Leonard, William Claxton (photography), and those who made their contribution to the jazz industry in a regular way (Andy Warhol, Josef Albers) or in a more anecdotal way (Salvador Dalí, Bernard Buffet). But on the other hand business and industry managed to solicit jazz to sell their products and spice them with exoticism.

- 6 With its chronological thread, the catalogue (better than the show itself) helps to shed light on the development of the West's relationship to the emblematic figure of the "negro", readily caricatured, but whose charisma enthralls, and whose status shifts gradually from ambivalent object of repulsion and desire to the claimed source of inspiration. The catalogue also shows how, from the African-American angle, both for the musicians bringing it to life and for the painters who steeped themselves in it, the claim of "negritude" passed by way of jazz. From the black-and-white Minstrels to the revolutionaries of free jazz, the "jazz field" was the cultural go-between of a spirit of self-assertiveness. In conclusion, an observation that is something of a lament: the poor representation of women in this pantheon of aesthetic modernity. The 20<sup>th</sup> century's encounter with jazz was first and foremost a men's thing.
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## NOTES

1. We also refer readers to issue n°19 of the *Revue d'esthétique* (Paris : Jean-Michel Place) devoted to jazz and published in 1991 (240 p.).
2. Cooper, Harry. "Quand les lignes se croisent : la peinture et le jazz entre 1925 et 1943", p. 161
3. Jackson Pollock, *Sentiers ondulés — Watery Paths* (1947). Picture reproduced on p. 235
4. Catherine de Smet "Design graphique en 30 x 30 cm", pp. 269-279